First Nights in The Theatres.

Few Other Successes Won Appreciation Like 'Lightnin'"

Critics Not So Generous to 'Hazel Kirke,' 'Adonis,' 'The Two Orphans,' 'The Old Homestead' and Others —Plays of Great Popularity Rare.

By LAWRENCE REAMER.

NOW that "Lightnin'" has departed with the honor of having achieved more representations than any other play the New York stage ever harbored, it is interesting to recall that it received when it was new, in the main, the most appreciative criticism. One critic found it unnecessary to say more than that the piece was drawn from "Tennessee's Pardner" without even taking the time to add whether he meant Bret Harte's story or the drama founded on it. But such treatment of Mr. Bacon and his play was almost unique. Generally there was warm recognition of the rare qualities in both.

Few of the predecessors of "Lightnin'" met with the same critical appreciation. Of course, less was written about the theatre in the days that saw the majority of these pieces. "Hazel Kirke" had 487 representations. Yet the seeker for any critical analysis of Steele Mackaye's play will find it contained chiefly in the often reiterated charge that the piece came directly with little or no change from "The Green Lanes of England."

There was approval for the dancing of Henry E. Dixey when "Adonis" had the first of its 604 performances at the Bijou Theatre. Yet there was almost as much concern over the scantiness of some of the women's costumes which would to-day seem Puritanically exaggerated in the matter of drapery.

"The Two Orphans," although Kate Claxton acted it with the company at the Union Square Theatre some 219—this was in 1875—times, it was rather patronizingly referred to by the press as merely melodrama. Criticism takes a curious turn at times when in the face of what the public is determined to make a masterpiece.

Few Others Fared Any Better.

When Denman Thompson turned his sketch "The Female Bathers" into "The Old Homestead" he probably had no idea that the play was to become famous for its popularity in this country. Certainly it received at first no critical attention. The author, who like Mr. Bacon played the leading role, had to be satisfied with the devotion of the public and the resulting prosperity which increased year after year. Eventually William Dean Howells got around to "The Old Homestead" in his study of the American drama and found it a genuine specimen of the native theatre, racy of the soil and in a high degree representative of the genius of its people. So the postponed attention came at last from a distinguished source. It had nearly a quarter of a century ago 372 representations in New York.

Charles Hoyt's plays never received careful attention in their day until the position of the author as an American humorist came to be understood. When "A Trip to Chinatown" began its season of 658 performances nothing seemed, to judge by contemporaneous comment, to strike the critics so much as the resemblance of the play in form to the farce of the boulevards. Of course it was not that quality, just as the comment may have been, that kept the public coming to see the piece during all the months it was at the little Madison Square Theatre.

"The Black Crook" was to its first reviewers a success of scandal. It must have taken ever fresh scandal to keep it alive during the generations that it proved irresistible to American theatregoers. There was of course something else in the fairy play or it never would have lasted so long even at its first run of 476 hearings. Criticism failed to trouble itself with this quality, whatever it may have been, but "The Black Crook" made theatre history for years.

So it may be seen that the old charge against criticism holds still in the case of the popular plays. There are few judges who can detect the peculiarities in a play that will serve to keep the public so long interested. Indeed there are few critics who are searching for them. What is going to appeal to the thousands will not make an impression on the mind of a critic. If criticism really be the impressions of a soul under the influence of a masterpiece no popular drama will evoke it. It is only what is out of the way that is likely to make the critical soul subject to the influence of masterpieces.

Rarity of the Masterpiece.

As it happens the play sure of great popularity turns up about as rarely as the masterpiece. There have been precious few of either kind on the New York stage this young year. W. A. Brady had a sudden fit of honesty the other day and while he was busy pushing "The Teaser" off the stage of the Playhouse with one hand he held up the other to the public as evidence of good faith and declared that his first play had been a failure. There was no reason why it should not have been but for the engaging personality of Miss Faire Binney. What Mr. Brady meant was that the piece had been as well a complete financial failure. As it happened, Mr. Brady spilled by this frankness only his own beans.

What a mighty fall of beans there would be, however, if the other managers should be just as frank. What a tale of sorrows they could unfold. How many of them have watched their empty theatres night after night and seen no encouraging increase in the number of visitors. It is amazing the tenacity with which the public can stay out of the theatres if it makes up its mind to. Evidently there has been so far no impulse to step up and buy tickets. Nor has there been any particular reason so far why the public should have hurried to the theatres. Yet this is not after all a cause for surprise. It needs only a little reflection to buck up the most discouraged theatregoer.

This is only the last week in August. The average early opening brings out every year plays of about the same quality. There are better ones to come. Certainly that optimistic verse insisting that we'll be happy yet, you bet, may be made applicable to the great art of the drama.

Miss Fontanne of "Dulcy" Warns of Mannerisms

English Actress Has a Word of Caution for Those Who Play Themselves.

Miss Lynn Fontanne struck a note of charming candor that showed, even though she was playing in such high comedy as "Dulcy," she made no pretence of being a slave to the spiritually idealistic when not acting. "Oh, my!" she exclaimed in her dressing room at the Frazee Theatre after finishing a matinee during which Marc Connelly, co-author with George S. Kaufman, had been busy out front counting up the house.

"Oh, my!" she breathed. "Acting makes one so hungry!"

The interviewer smiled—he had never encountered such sincere directness before in an actress, especially when she knew she was about to be interviewed. Usually a star had been found sitting with her soul tugging at the leash, straining to sigh about the hard road of us artists.

"But really I'm hungry!" protested Miss Fontanne. "Actors are always hungry. So are lecturers. Talking for a long while does it. Try it yourself."

Instead the reporter confined himself to inquiring whether in England, where Miss Fontanne first developed an appetite, she had observed many *Dulcineas*, prattling bromides till it seemed the fifty mile belt of air above the earth would soon be exhausted.

"Of course there are *Dulcys* in England," said Miss Fontanne, as one who did not wish her native land to be slighted. "The type is no more national than women's tongues. J. Hartley Manners, Laurette Taylor's husband, wrote a play about a woman friend of his who was just that type, only she was more intelligent than *Dulcy*—and this is the first play, I believe, which has been built around such a young woman's babblings. It calls for every bit of delicate handling I have, for the girl has to be shown as an intellectual lightweight, and yet she has to be loaded down with charm.

"No, I never read of her in the newspaper column in which she originated, for the simple reason that I never read the column. It was only a couple of days ago that I first dipped into it, so I can't be accused of plagiarizing on it. You see, reading newspapers in England when you're young is considered almost a crime. Naturally I shunned such a bad habit. Now I'm trying to make up for it, and so I'll suddenly read all the newspapers I can lay my hands on, and then go for days utterly forgetting there are any such things. At the end of a week I'm conscience stricken, and start all over again."

Over here Miss Fontanne believes that a system in the theatre much to be desired is something like the repertory programme—though she hesitates to express a definite opinion, being desirous of being considered "modest, but not too modest." A play, she believes, should be put on for a short run—but not changed weekly—and another substituted as soon as the first showed signs of wearing out its welcome.

"That would prevent the growth of mannerisms in an actor," she said, "and actors should be protected from mannerisms by a guardian angel or an act of Legislature. Long runs in one part are apt to develop them—fortunately I've been saved from long runs, though they do no harm to one's prosperity. In this country, as in England, they are often ready to fall down and worship a player with marked idiosyncrasies, but for my own sake I hope I'll never get to the point where I'll always be playing myself."

Some thing of this training in variety of characterization and expression was accorded to Miss Fontanne when she played in "Out There" and "Happiness" with Laurette Taylor, for whom she has much beaming admiration as a jolly good sort, full of humorous tricks off the stage as well as on. Indeed, Miss Fontanne might be taken for a brunette sister of the blonde Laurette, for she has something of the other star's quirk in her smile and a similar trick of opening her eyes wide like a sunburst, and if she wore a light wig instead of her curly dark hair Miss Fontanne might almost be privileged to carry on Michael in "Peg o' My Heart."

"One thing that struck me about Miss Taylor," she said, "didn't have its full meaning brought home to me until I played this, my first long part, in which I talk for minutes and minutes at a time. That was that just before she'd go on for a scene I'd see her go by herself in the wings and sit down quietly. Sometimes I'd go up and talk to her and she'd say scarcely a word to me. I'd conclude she was merely in an unresponsive mood and go away, but now I see she was girding herself up for the next bit.

"One has to be in the proper mood to play in high comedy, particularly where a pathetic scene comes right after a long stretch of laughter and some of the audience are so apt to get it into their heads to laugh at the wrong time. Usually I can work myself into the right mood if I'm not all wound up for it at the start. But it is getting in the suitable temper for it that makes comedy so much harder than farce, and it's right there that those little backstage conversations, so delightful otherwise, break into one's frame of mind dreadfully. Often before a scene I go to one side and just sort of commune with myself."

"Do you take long walks before a performance," she was asked, " or read a soothing book, or have the curtains drawn?"

"Of course not," she laughed. "I don't lash myself."

'Lightnin'' Among the Plays in Brooklyn

Although "Lightnin'" has left Broadway, it is to remain on view nearby. John Golden has assembled a special company, including Milton Nobles, Miss Bessie Bacon and others who have appeared at the Gaiety for extended periods during the three years' run, and this organization will open the new season of the Montauk, Brooklyn, tomorrow night. The prices will be approximately one-half the scale that has prevailed at the Gaiety. Other members of the company are Percy Winter, Dolly W. Nobles, Frank Thornton and Barney Gilmore.

"Love Birds," the musical comedy headed by Pat Rooney and Marion Bent, which established last season a record for business at the Majestic, has been selected as the initial offering for the week commencing to-morrow night.

Miss Elisabeth Murray will be seen in her original characterization. Others in the cast include Misses Sylvia Elias, Grace Ellsworth, Lillian Baker, Leila Romer and Helen Delany. It was written by Edgar Allan Woolf, who paralleled love stories in telling his theme. Sigmund Romberg provided the score to Ballard MacDonald's lyrics.

Fay and Florence Courtney, Kramer and Boyle, Bert Errol, James B. Donovan and Princess Radjah will be the principal entertainers at the New Brighton. Others will be the Scandinavian Trio and the Pekin Troupe.

Robert Emmett Keane and Claire Whitney in "The Gossipy Sex" will be the headliners at the Orpheum.

Wallace Reid in "The Hell-Diggers" will be the feature film at the Strand.

Emma Dunn Stage Mother at Twenty, and Still at It

Selected by Mansfield for Maternal Part Actress Never Got Away From Them.

Travelling the road of memory from her present portrayal of the blind mother in "Sonny Boy," George V. Hobart's melody play, to her first maternal role in the theatre, Miss Emma Dunn finds perspective one of the clarifying things in the world.

"When I played the mother of *Peer Gynt* for Richard Mansfield I was scarcely 20," Miss Dunn began, "I felt that nothing could be worse for a girl who had done little beyond beginning her career as an actress than to become associated with mature parts. Therefore I fought against it, though nowhere else in the theatre could I have found a greater interest.

"I wanted to play sweet young ingenues, and if it had not been for the discernment of Mr. Mansfield I probably would have had my wish. When he asked me to play *Asa Gynt* to his *Peer Gynt* I never had played a mature role on the stage. His offer was born of two things. The first was his wish to find a player for *Peer's* mother whom he could hold in his arms. The second was that remarkable vision which enabled him to discern in me an undeveloped tenderness of characterizttion. *Asa* was a primitive type; a little wiry farm woman whose drunken husband failed to satisfy her craving for love. As a consequence she loved her son with an almost insane intensity.

"Quite another type of mother was my *Mrs. Warren* in 'The Warrens of Virginia.' She was a charming Southern woman, who lived solely for her husband and her children. Her type of obedient devotion is quite obsolete in this latter day.

"By the way," Miss Dunn digressed for a moment, "the company which Mr. Belasco presented in William De Mille's 'The Warrens of Virginia' was a remarkable aggregation of players. Frank Keenan was the husband, Charlotte Walker the oldest girl, Mary Pickford the youngest daughter and Cecil De Mille the son, and I the mother.

"My next mother was a German woman in 'The Baby,' a vaudeville sketch written by John Stokes. She was a primitive young mother who had to give her baby up to a foundling asylum. Following in quick succession came the title role of "Mother," Jules Eckert Goodman's play. In this I was the mother of six children. For the redemption of one of these she sacrificed the money of the other five, but she did redeem the one.

"In 'He and She,' Rachel Crothers's play, produced by the Selwyns, I impersonated a very modern mother, the wife of a sculptor and an unconscious genius. In her I found a great realization of motherhood, as I did also in my mother part in 'Sinners,' but Mrs. Crosby, the mother of *Sonny*, is the greatest of them all. In fact, I believe I may say that she is my greatest role in the theatre."

Nine New Productions in the Theatres

MONDAY.

GAIETY THEATRE—John Golden presents Winchell Smith's play, "The Wheel." Self-control is its theme. Prominent in the cast of players are Miss Ida St. Leon, Thomas W. Ross, Charles Laite, Frank Burbeck, Stuart Fox, Harold Waldridge and Mrs. Margot Williams.

HUDSON THEATRE—The Selwyns will produce "The Poppy God," a drama by Leon Gordon, Le Roy Clemens and Thomas Grant Springer. Heading the company are Ralph Morgan, Harry Mestayer and Miss Edna Hibbard. The play reveals the capacity for hate and revenge possessed by the Chinese race. John Wenger designed the settings and lighting effects.

TUESDAY.

GEORGE M. COHEN THEATRE—Charles Dillingham will present Barney Bernard in "Two Blocks Away," comedy by Aaron Hoffman. It is Bernard's first appearance, except in the character of *Abe Potash*, in eight seasons. The theme is the influence of sudden wealth upon character, and the entire action takes place within two city blocks on the East Side. The cast includes John Cope, Miss Marie Carroll, John Rutherford and Wallace Erskine. The production has been designed by Livingston Platt.

ELTINGE THEATRE—A. H. Woods will present Miss Helen MacKellar in Fannie Hurst's first play, entitled "Back Pay." It is in three acts and an epilogue, with the scenes laid in the middle West and in New York. The heroine is a girl brought up in sinister surroundings, who triumphs over her environment. Miss MacKellar will be supported by Frank M. Thomas, Miss Mary Shaw, Miss Lucille La Verne, Edward L. Walton, Miss Judith Vosselli and others.

SHUBERT THEATRE—"The Greenwich Village Follies, 1921," the third annual revusical comedy of New York's Latin Quarter, is announced by the Bohemians, Inc. This production was devised and staged by John Murray Anderson. The lyrics were written by Arthur Swanstrom, music by Carey Morgan and costumes were designed by Robert Locher, who, with Mr. Anderson, planned the settings. Those who collaborated with Mr. Anderson are Oliver Herford, humorist; H. I. Phillips, newspaper columnist, and Miss Blanche Merrill. In the cast will be Ted Lewis, James Watts, Miss Irene Franklin, Miss Ada Forman, Miss Bird Millman, Miss Gretchen Eastman, Miss Margaret Petit and others.

WEDNESDAY.

PLYMOUTH THEATRE—Arthur Hopkins will present Miss Marjorie Rambeau, by arrangement with A. H. Woods, in Zoe Akin's play, "Daddy's Gone A-Hunting." The production has been designed by Robert Edmond Jones and staged by Mr. Hopkins. In the company are Lee Baker, Frank Conroy, Hugh Dillman, Manart Kippen, John Robb and Miss Helen Robbins.

THURSDAY.

NATIONAL THEATRE—Brock Pemberton will produce Sidney Howard's play, "Swords," with Miss Clare Eames and Jose Ruben in principal roles, at this new playhouse on West Forty-first street. The action of the play takes place in mediæval Italy in the twelfth century. The setting and costumes have been designed by Robert Edmond Jones and incidental music composed by Donald N. Tweedy. The production has been staged under the direction of Mr. Pemberton. A choir selected from the Paulist Choristers will sing the incidental music. The cast includes Charles Waldron, Raymond Bloomer, Montague Rutherford, Edward Mackay, John Saunders and Miss Sophie Wilda.

BROADHURST THEATRE—George Broadhurst will present a dramatic version in four acts and ten episodes of "Tarzan of the Apes," by Major Herbert Woodgate and Arthur Gibbons, based on a novel of the same title by Edgar Rice Burroughs. The American version has been made by Mr. Broadhurst. The production has been staged by Mrs. Trimble Bradley. The cast will include Edward Stillward, Ronald Adair, Forrest Robinson, Howard Kyle, Lionel Glenister, Alfred Arno and Minna Gale Haynes.

SATURDAY.

HIPPODROME—Charles Dillingham departs somewhat from his Hippodrome policy of the last six seasons in the presentation of "Get Together," his seventh annual production here, with a new scale of prices in which the admission schedule of former seasons is reduced one-half. R. H. Burnside staged this entertainment, which has stars and novelties drawn from England, Russia, Germany, France, Belgium, Holland, Switzerland, Austria and Spain. Fokine and Fokina will present their own ballet corps in the world premiere of "The Thunder Bird," written from an Aztec legend by Fokina and staged by Fokine and set to music from Borodin, Glinka, Rimsky-Korsakoff and Tschaikowsky, with an orchestra under the direction of Dr. Anselm Goetzl, and costumes and scenes by Willy Pogany. Charlotte returns with the ice ballet, "The Red Shoes," from the Admiral's Ice Palace, Berlin. Ferry Corwey, musical clown, again reports for duty, together with Moran, a new comer. Others will be Bert Levy, the Five Kaetha, the Graf Trio, Power's Elephants, the Three Bobs and "Watt."

Charlotte of the Ice Is Coming Back

When Charlotte came five years ago to the Hippodrome, to which she is now returning, New York society did not know as much about ice skating as it does now, for it did not take the sport very seriously. The beauty and grace of the performances of the little wonder of the steel runners took society to the Hippodrome. Leisure and a desire for something new set its members trying the new sport the little foreigner interpreted. Many well known persons in New York invited Charlotte to their country clubs and house parties and began seriously to master the sport she exemplified. They organized clubs, hired sessions for private skating at the local rinks, flooded fields at country clubs, built skating houses, brought the best foreign skaters from Europe to teach them, and to-day there is half a dozen society skaters as good as most of the professionals.

One skating club in this city has 150 members, including fifty millionaires. There are ten women's clubs exclusively devoted to skating. There is one club for children of well known families that has 200 members. At every big winter resort in the country skating is one of the special features, for which rinks are provided, instructors brought from New York, prize contests held and special series of skating carnivals and entertainments. Seldom if ever in the history of an athletic sport in the United States has so many people suddenly developed interest in a new and difficult pastime.

New Imperial for Shubert Vaudeville

When the Imperial Theatre, which the Shuberts are building at Fifty-eighth street and Seventh avenue, is opened it will be one of the handsomest and best equipped playhouses in New York. A combination of the Empire and Renaissance periods has been applied in the decorations and architecture. A color scheme of burnt orange and black has been employed. Representations of Drama, Music and the Dance in bas-relief decorate the walls.

The lobby and boxes are finished in marble imported from Italy and marble columns are on each side of the proscenium arch. Restful chairs are upholstered in burnt orange with black stripes.

The theatre will seat 2,000, the orchestra alone having 1,200 chairs. There are twenty-four boxes, sixteen on each side of the orchestra floor. By reason of its construction the Imperial can play either dramatic or musical productions or vaudeville, though it will be devoted immediately to Shubert advanced vaudeville. It will have a stage forty-five by eighty feet.

There will be lounge and smoking room on the mezzanine floor for both men and women, with windows overlooking Central Park. Here tea will be served and free cigarettes offered to patrons. The dressing rooms are in a separate wing.

The Imperial will be the second theatre in the Columbus Circle district owned and operated by the Shuberts, the other being the Century.